

Carmelite echoes in the Lourdes Grotto

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When the editor of *Carmel in the World* asked me to write an article about the link between Carmelite spirituality and Lourdes, the famous shrine of Our Lady in south-western France, I was very happy to do so because it's a tremendously important place in my life. I've been lucky enough to have gone there on pilgrimage many times, including several visits in the Jubilee Year of 2008 which marks the 150th anniversary of Mary's apparitions to Saint Bernadette Soubirous.



Carmelite friar Fr. Tony Lester, O.Carm., preaching at the Grotto in Lourdes

But before I can tell you why I think there's a strong link between the message of Lourdes and Carmelite spirituality, there's something I feel I have to say first: I am not a big fan of apparitions generally. There, I feel better for writing that! Let me explain...

Extraordinary religion

When I was a teenager (all of a decade ago), I used to be very attracted by the extraordinary (even spooky) parts of our Catholic faith: visions, weeping statues, saints who could reveal your past and your future, stigmata, Eucharistic miracles and so on – I was fascinated by it all. And when I first came to Lourdes aged thirteen I discovered all sorts of out-of-the-ordinary things to excite me: a vision story, miraculous healings, 'holy' water, and enough glow-in-the-dark crucifixes and tacky religious art to fill the town's three basilicas and numerous chapels. There's nothing wrong with piety, of course, but it needs to be balanced and sensible.

Looking back at my thirteen year-old self on my first visit to Lourdes, I think I can excuse my somewhat unhealthy obsession with religion and its weirder aspects. A lot of young people go through this phase, looking for the next great sensation and for something meaningful. Some people turn to drugs, others turn to sex, and I turned to religion. However, going on pilgrimage to Lourdes marked a turning point in my spiritual life (or as I prefer to say, 'life in the Spirit', because all life should have a spiritual aspect). Lourdes helped me to discover a much deeper side

to faith – a relationship with the Living God, a relationship with fellow pilgrims – and this meant I was ready to move on in my spiritual journey.

Maturing faith

It was the Carmelites who helped to mature my faith. The first Carmelite I knew was my mother Angela, who became a member of the Third Order shortly after our first trip to Lourdes in 1992. Mum had wanted to go to Lourdes since she was a little girl, in fact ever since she was cured of a terminal illness at the age of four, a cure which she attributes to the intercession of Mary. My grandfather had prayed for mum all night before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes in their parish church on the south coast of England; returning home he got a phone call from the hospital. Expecting to hear that his little girl had died, he learnt instead that she had made an instant and complete recovery. My grandfather had promised to take my mother to Lourdes on a pilgrimage of thanksgiving, but this all took place during the Second World War when travel to France was impossible, and he was never able to fulfil his pledge. Instead, my grandfather took my mother to Aylesford Priory – nicknamed ‘the second Carmel’ – when the Carmelites returned to their ancient home in 1949. It was at Aylesford that my mother made her profession as a Carmelite tertiary in the 1990s, and where I first learned about the Order.



The Carmelite friars returning to Aylesford in 1949

When I left home at eighteen to go to university, the Carmelites remained a significant presence in my life, as did Lourdes. At university in the north of England I met Carmelite friars, enclosed nuns, apostolic sisters and lay people who impressed me deeply with their love of God and one another. These followers of Jesus Christ helped me to move beyond the obvious and instant ‘pleasures’ of faith, and taught me to meditate on life at a deeper level. The Carmelites I met had little interest in apparitions, and I discovered that many of Carmel’s saints were likewise sceptical of extraordinary spiritual phenomena (even those who experienced such things themselves didn’t put too much store by them). I learnt that Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross were sceptical of visions, believing that such things sometimes happened but considering interest in them to be for the ‘spiritual beginner’. I came to appreciate what Saint Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.’ (*1 Cor 13:11*).

Putting aside childish ways

At university I put an end to childish ways by throwing out my books on the weird and wacky aspects of Catholicism. I stopped collecting relics of Saint Such-And-Such The Astonishing, I stopped watching TV programmes about visionaries who predicted the end of the world, and I dismantled the shrine of pious clutter that was beginning to take over my bedroom. Instead I began to read the Bible more seriously, I studied the documents of the Carmelite Order, and I put more energy into social action work in my parish. In Carmel my religious enthusiasm was given a stronger foundation, and expressed itself more fruitfully.

As I grew in my Carmelite vocation I expected my interest in Lourdes to diminish. I thought that perhaps the apparition story there and the miraculous healings were just for ‘spiritual beginners’ who were well-meaning but perhaps naïve, as I felt I had been. On the surface of it, Lourdes seemed to represent all the eccentric religion (even superstition) of my adolescence that I was finding more and more unattractive. But on the contrary, as my immersion in Carmel deepened my appreciation of Lourdes and its message also became better rooted. The more I read the Bible and the writings of Carmel’s saints, the more I saw parallels in the story of Bernadette’s encounter with Mary. I think what Carmel did was to give me a language and an experience of relationships with God and others that helped me to see what is really important about Lourdes.

The Lourdes message

You probably know the Lourdes story well, but just in case you don’t I’ll summarise it briefly and try to highlight some aspects of the ‘Lourdes message’ that seem to me to strike a chord with the Carmelite way of living and of seeing the world. From the outset I want to say that you can be a perfectly good Christian without believing that Our Lady appeared in Lourdes. You could find something worthwhile in Lourdes as a place of pilgrimage even if the apparition story wasn’t true. As it happens, I do believe that Mary appeared to Bernadette. I have come to accept that is because the Lourdes story strikes me as authentic in a number of ways. Firstly, as I’ve said above, I perceive parallels between the Lourdes story and parts of Scripture. Secondly, the Lourdes story is very much in keeping with the rich tradition of Marian devotion in the surrounding Pyrenean mountains, and so it fits a particular context. Thirdly, the happenings at Lourdes follow the normal conventions of Marian apparitions in that they were short, simple, and focussed on the Gospel; this is what makes a vision of Our Lady authentic. It seems to me that many of the Marian apparitions that people claim are happening today do not fit these criteria. So what did happen in Lourdes 150 years ago?



Saint Bernadette Soubirous

On 11th February 1858, a fourteen year-old peasant girl in the French mountain town of Lourdes went out of her family home (a disused prison called the Cachot – they were very poor) to search for firewood. She was called Bernadette Soubirous. With two friends Bernadette arrived at a cave outside the town known as the Grotto of Masabielle. It was a local rubbish dump covered with pig droppings and medical waste, not to mention mud and wood washed up by the neighbouring River Gave. To get to the wood beyond the cave the girls took off their shoes and stockings so that they could cross the little canal stream that ran in front of the Grotto. Bernadette was slower at removing her shoes than the others because she had very bad asthma and had recently survived a cholera attack. She was slower than her friends in another way too; although she was intelligent she found study difficult, she could barely read and write, and spoke only the local dialect which was more like Spanish than French. She had wanted to make her first Holy Communion at church, but was worried that she wouldn’t be allowed because her knowledge of the catechism was poor.



My mother Angela with fellow Carmelite pilgrims in the Cachot

Bernadette took off her shoes by the canal stream, perhaps knowing that it flowed from the mills up in the town. Her father François had been a miller grinding corn but had fallen into debt, resulting in his wife Louise and four children being evicted from their home. To make matters worse, François had been falsely accused of stealing flour. Bernadette did what work she could to support the family, but it wasn't easy getting jobs when you're ill and people think your father's a criminal. Whether Bernadette reflected that morning on these difficulties in her life we don't know, but as she sat by the stream her attention was distracted by the sound of a gust of wind. She looked up but the trees weren't moving. Her eyes drifted over towards the Masabielle Grotto and she saw something – or was it someone? – standing in a niche in the cave. Terrified, Bernadette instinctively reached for her rosary. She tried to make the sign of the cross but her arm felt paralysed. The thing in the rock – it looked like a young woman dressed in white – started to make the sign of the cross and Bernadette found she could copy her. Together the lady in the rock and Bernadette started saying the *Our Father* (or at least the lady mouthed the words). A few minutes later when Bernadette's friends returned, the lady was gone.

Pulled by an interior call

This was the first of eighteen apparitions that Bernadette witnessed over the next five months. Despite initial opposition from her parents, Bernadette felt compelled by an inner voice to return to the Grotto, being accompanied on each occasion by larger and larger crowds. The people could not see the apparition; some whispered that it was Our Lady, some said it was the devil, whilst others said it was the figment of a sick peasant girl's imagination. What all bystanders could see was that Bernadette became a person transformed when she beheld the woman in the cave. On some occasions the lady was silent, and at other times she spoke. She first spoke on 18th February during the third apparition, when she asked Bernadette very politely (and in Bernadette's native dialect rather than in French) if she would return to the Grotto each day over the coming fortnight, which she did.

During the same apparition, the lady – whom we now know was the Mother of God – told Bernadette that she did not promise her happiness in this world, 'but rather in the other'. What is this 'other world' that Mary spoke of? I used to think it refers to heaven; that we are not promised happiness in this life, but only once we have died, so we should accept unhappiness as our lot. Carmelite spirituality has given me a different perspective on this phrase. I now believe that by 'the other world' Mary was indeed referring to the heavenly kingdom but in the sense of something we can experience here and now. Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, and left us the mission of continuing to build that Kingdom. We build that Kingdom by living

God's values and aware of God's love. Living in this way will make the 'other world' come about and this will make us happy. Many people find that coming to Lourdes makes them happy because they get a glimpse of how the world can be; it gives them energy to go back home and build up the Kingdom there. In Lourdes we see people who are normally on the margins of society – the sick, the disabled, the poor, the foreigner – brought into the centre. It is in that kind of world that we will be happy. Until I encountered the insights of Carmel I didn't think that we could expect to be happy in this life. It was reading Saint Thérèse of Lisieux that I came to better appreciate Our Lady's message in Lourdes. Thérèse was full of confidence in God, and knew that God wants us to be happy in this life as well as in the next. She knew that God's Kingdom can come about in our lives. In her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, she quoted from St. Luke: "I understand and I know from experience that *The Kingdom of God is within you.*" (*Manuscript A, Ch. 8*).

Turn back to God

God's Kingdom cannot come about fully on earth unless we turn back to God again and again; as John the Baptist declared, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (*Matthew 3:2*). The idea of repentance, conversion or penance is at the heart of the message of Lourdes. Penance derives from the Latin word *poenitentia*, which is linked to the Greek notion of *metanoia*, and which literally means a change of mind or physical change of direction. At the eighth apparition in Lourdes on 24th February, Bernadette said that the woman in the Grotto was crying as she said "Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners." What Our Lady was calling for was a change of direction, a turning back to God, just as John the Baptist and Jesus himself had called for. Mary's message at Lourdes is not a new teaching. It is a reminder of the Gospel message: turn back to God, because God loves you. Like the Good News, the message of Lourdes also has a missionary aspect: we are to pray for sinners. By our prayers and our lives we must call others back to God, who waits for us like the tender father awaiting the prodigal son.

The idea of conversion and penance is also crucial to understanding the ninth apparition. On that occasion the lady at the Grotto asked Bernadette to "wash in the spring and drink there", and to eat the grass growing nearby. Uncertain what the lady meant, Bernadette eventually uncovered a dirty puddle of water at the back of the cave from which she took a small sip. Dipping her hands into the muddy water, she covered her face and hands in mud. She also chewed some of the plants growing nearby. People watching assumed that Bernadette was mad, and some angry bystanders even slapped her. She was taken that evening to the Public Prosecutor who tried to uncover some sort of fraud, but could bring no charges against her. This episode always reminds me of Christ's Passion: he ate bitter herbs at the Passover meal, was struck by soldiers who thought he was deluded, and though innocent he was placed on trial. Bernadette experienced for herself in a small way the suffering Christ endured for love of sinners.

Water of life

During her incarceration, Bernadette did not know that the muddy spring she had uncovered in the Grotto had begun to run clear water. It is often said that Bernadette 'discovered' a hitherto unknown spring in the Grotto. This isn't actually true; some local people did know about the spring, but it had become so clogged with dirt that it had long been abandoned. Bernadette's action can therefore be seen as a metaphor for the life of faith. At our baptism the pouring of water symbolises our cleansing and entry into the family of God. This 'living water' (of which Christ spoke to the Samaritan Woman at the Well) continues to flow in our hearts, but if we're not careful it can become clogged up by sin and indifference. Bernadette was not discovering a new source of water but cleared away the clutter so that an old source could flow again. Carmel's saints continually remind us of the need to declutter our lives, giving space for God. If we let our hearts be touched by God's hand, and if we are willing to drink and wash in the waters of our baptism, we will find water that revives and heals.



The spring in the Grotto

The water in the Grotto at Lourdes quickly became renowned for its healing effects (or more accurately, God showed his healing power through the symbol of this water which is quite ordinary). In early March 1858, the first miraculous healing in Lourdes took place when a pregnant woman, Catherine Latapie, bathed her paralysed arm in the spring. The image of water is one that is familiar to all Christians and to Carmelites in particular. The word ‘Carmel’ means an orchard, vineyard or garden, and Mount Carmel – the place where our Order originated and which has become a metaphor in our spiritual landscape – is often thought of as a fertile valley, an oasis in the desert. Whenever I stand at the Grotto in Lourdes, the spring and the surrounding mountains make me think of photos I have seen of Carmel.

Made in the image of God

One of my favourite images of Our Lady in Lourdes is an icon in the Youth Village overlooking the town. It depicts Mary as Our Lady of Mount Carmel (we’ll see why shortly) and on either side of her are the prophet Elijah and Saint Bernadette. Both are shown by springs of water emerging from rock.



The icon in the Lourdes Youth Village

The water by which Bernadette stands clearly represents the spring in the Grotto. The spring by which Elijah sits is the brook of Cherith. According to the Bible story (*1 Kings 17:3*), God told Elijah that he should hide himself by Cherith and drink of the water. Both Bernadette and Elijah

received heavenly calls to go to a place where their thirst would be quenched. Perhaps the greatest difference in their stories is that eventually Cherith dried up and Elijah had to move away because of the drought which he himself had called down upon the people; Bernadette on the other hand released water which quenched the spiritual thirst of the people. Elijah is shown on the icon as a solitary living in the Wadi Cherith, who was eventually led out of his solitude into an encounter with others. He is regarded by us Carmelites as spiritual founder of our Order, and according to our *Rule of Saint Albert* the first hermits on Mount Carmel gathered by a spring of water known as the Fountain of Elijah. On the icon Bernadette is shown in the Grotto with the basilicas of Lourdes behind her, perhaps representing the fact that she was also, in a sense, the founder of a Christian community, namely pilgrims to Lourdes. She is also shown holding a cross, the symbol of a martyr, and although she did not die for her faith in the conventional sense of martyrdom she certainly gave her life for the service of others.

In 1858 Bernadette attracted huge crowds of pilgrims; so many began calling at the prison which was her home that she and her family were moved out of there. On 2nd March the thirteenth apparition took place before nearly 1,500 people, many of whom were repenting, turning back to God and to the practice of their faith. The parish priest, Fr. Peyramale, was uncertain what to make of it all, particularly when Bernadette told him what the lady said to her that day: “Go, tell the priests to bring people here in procession and have a sanctuary built.”

Risen from the dead

I find in this incident another echo of the Gospel, namely the Resurrection story. All Christians are ‘Easter people’ but for Carmelites the Resurrection has particular importance; in Bernadette’s day Carmelites held regular celebrations of the Resurrection throughout the Christian year. The white cloak of the Carmelite habit is sometimes interpreted as symbolic of the robes in Christ’s empty tomb. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead was related by women who had come to his tomb and who were sent by a heavenly messenger to announce the Good News to the ‘officials’ of the Church, the Apostles. Like those women, Bernadette was charged with a message to the ‘officials’ of the Church, the clergy. Like those women, Bernadette was met with scepticism and doubt from the men in charge.

In the Bible, and in the Carmelite tradition, it is often women who are charged with the responsibility of conveying the will of God. It is probably true to say that it is the women of our Order who are the best known exponents of our tradition; think for example of Teresa of Jesus, Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, and so on. The central relationship in the Lourdes story is that between two young women, Bernadette and Mary. Bernadette said that Our Lady seemed to be about her own age, and spoke to her in her own dialect “as one person would speak to another”. The way that Mary related to Bernadette reminds me of what our *Rule of Saint Albert* says about those in leadership within Carmel: they are to be respectful of others, acting not as overlords but as servants of the community. Mary appeared to Bernadette in a way that the young girl could understand and identify with. I think this is something that I came to appreciate more as my understanding of Mary’s place in Carmel grew. The first chapel on Mount Carmel was dedicated to Mary, who was revered as the ‘Lady of the Place’. In Lourdes Mary is clearly ‘Lady of the Place’, but her presence is more sisterly and maternal than it is regal. In the Carmelite tradition we rightly revere Mary as Queen of Heaven, but more importantly we love her as Mother and Sister. In Carmel we are literally ‘familiar’ with Mary, that is to say, we see ourselves as members of her family. Rather than bringing her down to our level, in seeing Mary as sister we are raised up to her level, and reminded of the dignity that we share with her as children of God. Having been despised by many of the Lourdes townsfolk, Bernadette was given back her dignity by Mary, who was always courteous to her, and never made any demands. All Mary’s requests to Bernadette were just that, requests, and we can learn much from her example about how to relate to others with kindness and respect.

The request Our Lady made was to have a sanctuary built at the Grotto. The phrase is often translated as ‘chapel’, but in the patois that Mary spoke with Bernadette she used a term that meant more than just a physical building. The Pyrenees mountains in Bernadette’s day were full of small shrines to Our Lady that were known as sanctuaries. They were places of pilgrimage that offered welcome and shelter to travellers, safe places in a harsh environment, much as the first chapel on Mount Carmel seems to have been. In asking the priests to build a sanctuary in Lourdes, Our Lady was asking for a safe and welcoming place for sinners to come and find rest. The official name of the area of churches in Lourdes to this day is the Sanctuary.

A processing people

The other part of Our Lady’s request was that people should come to the sanctuary ‘in procession’. In order to have a procession, people must come together; you cannot have a procession on your own. Part of our calling as Carmelites is to be solitaries who gather to form communities. Ours is an Order built on relationships with other people. Processions are traditionally associated with places of pilgrimage. The Carmelite Order originated in the Holy Land which was a place of pilgrimage. It is likely that some of the first hermits living on Mount Carmel were pilgrims to Jerusalem, and they would have known plenty about processions. Perhaps this is why processions have always played an important part in the life and liturgy of Carmelites. Until the 1960s – and again in recent years – many Carmelite communities of friars and nuns had regular processions in honour of the Resurrection. When processing in Lourdes during the daily Blessed Sacrament or Torchlight Marian Processions, Carmelites are continuing an ancient tradition of walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, in the company of his mother.



Fr. Francis Kemsley, O.Carm., processing in Lourdes with parishioners from the Carmelite parish in Walworth, south London.



Carmelite friar Bro. Ged Walsh, O.Carm., carrying the cross during the Marian Torchlight Procession in Lourdes

Mary immaculate

It was at the sixteenth apparition – which took place on 25th March (the feast of the Annunciation) – that the lady in the Grotto finally told Bernadette her name: “I am the Immaculate Conception”. Bernadette did not understand this name, and it was not until after telling it to Fr. Peyramale that someone explained that “the Immaculate Conception” is a title given to Our Lady. The notion of Mary’s Immaculate Conception – that is, that Mary was preserved from original sin – had been formally declared a dogmatic teaching of the Church just four years earlier in 1854, and the Lourdes apparitions came to be seen as divine approval of that declaration. The notion of Mary’s Immaculate Conception has always been important to Carmelites, who had argued for this truth from the Middle Ages, often in the face of opposition from other religious orders. For me the significance of the dogma is really more about Christ than it is about Mary; indeed Mary should never be a distraction from Christ but rather she points us to her son. God’s purpose in keeping Mary free from the ‘stain of original sin’ was so that his son would take flesh in a perfect human being.

We should not think, however, that being born immaculate made either Mary or her son distant from the world; quite the opposite. The paradox at the heart of Lourdes is that Mary Immaculate appeared in a rubbish tip. This should not surprise us, particularly if we think of how Our Lord was born in the humility of a stable. What Carmelites are reminded of in Lourdes is that we shouldn’t be afraid to enter any arena of life. If Jesus was happy to be born in a stable, mix with sinners, and die a shameful death outside the city walls so that everyone could be reconciled with his father, then we should be willing to step beyond our comfort zones and meet people in the messiness of their lives. If Mary was willing to appear to a teenage peasant girl ostracised by her neighbours, then we should be ready to engage with anybody, no matter what other people think. If the Mother of God sought out the poorest person on the edges of society, then we, the members of her Order, must do likewise. In the Carmelite tradition we say that Mary is the Virgin of the Most Pure Heart. Mary’s purity of heart was not about keeping away from the untidiness of life, but rather it sent her to those most in need, to sinners. That is why she appeared in Lourdes. As Carmelites we pledge to live, as our *Rule* states, ‘in allegiance to Jesus Christ’. Christ had little time for those who use religion to judge and exclude people, and in Lourdes all people are welcomed. Those on the margins of society and the Church – the sick, the outcast, the sinner – are brought into the heart of God’s Kingdom.

Christ is our light

Bernadette received an interior call to return to the Grotto in Easter Week on 7th April. She was transfigured in an ecstatic trance, which was not interrupted even when the candle she was holding slipped from her grasp and engulfed her fingers for quarter of an hour. A local scientist, Dr. Dozous, examined her and found no sign of burning. From that moment he believed, but despite his support the bishop and the civil authorities ordered Bernadette to keep away from the Grotto which was boarded up, to the anger of many local people. The ‘miracle of the candle’ as the incident became known, is a reminder that faith transcends the usual realities of life. Flame is an important symbol to Carmelites; consider, for instance, the fire that our father Elijah called down from heaven during his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. On that occasion fire symbolised the truth that only God is God. In Lourdes, fire bore witness once again to the reality that the Lord God lives.

On 3rd June 1858, Bernadette made her first Holy Communion. Bernadette had found it hard to learn her catechism, but Our Lady had taught her how to pray, and contact with Jesus in the Eucharist was something that Bernadette hungered for. Carmelites appreciate the importance of the Eucharist in developing a close relationship with Jesus. Our *Rule of Saint Albert* states that Carmelites should attend Mass daily when convenient to do so. Through daily contact with Jesus Christ the Word of God – in the Eucharist, in the Divine Office, and in *Lectio Divina* – we

Carmelites become more and more familiar with Jesus as our daily bread, and we develop into the body of Christ ourselves.

Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

On 16th July 1858, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Bernadette received for the last time a mysterious inner call to go down to the Grotto. Since the cave was still blocked off by a barrier, Bernadette got as close as she could by crossing the River Gave to an area called La Ribère from which she looked across to the Grotto. She later recounted “I felt that I was in front of the Grotto, at the same distance as before. I saw only the Blessed Virgin; never was she more beautiful!”

Many people have found significance in the fact that the last apparition of Our Lady in Lourdes took place on the patronal feast of the Carmelite Order. Some other reputed visionaries, such as those in Fatima, said that Mary appeared to them dressed as Our Lady of Mount Carmel, that is, in the habit of the Order and carrying the brown scapular. Bernadette’s experience on 16th July seemed to be somewhat different, but still in keeping with the Carmelite tradition.

Bernadette said that the Virgin “was never more beautiful” than on that day. One of the ancient titles given to Our Lady by Carmelites is *Decor Carmeli* or “Beauty of Carmel”. Beauty is a sign of God’s goodness and love, and Mary is beautiful because she opened herself completely to the presence and love of God.

Be still and know

The final apparition in Lourdes also echoed Carmelite values in that it took place in silence. Silence is valued by Carmelites because we believe that God can speak to the depth of our hearts when we give God space to do so and when we learn to listen attentively. An important story for Carmelites is Elijah’s encounter with God on Mount Horeb, not in earthquake, wind or fire, but in the sound of a gentle breeze. Bernadette said that the first apparition was heralded by the sound of wind although “the trees were not moving”, and theologians interpret this as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, as encountered by Elijah and by the Apostles and Mary at Pentecost. It also seems to me appropriate that Our Lady did not speak in either the first two or the last two apparitions. It is as though Mary is indicating to Bernadette and to us that she is not the message, rather it is God who is the message. As Mary said in the Gospel, “Do whatever he tells you” (*John 2:5*). In John’s account of the Gospel, these are Mary’s last words; she points to Jesus and then keeps silence.

I think there’s something also significant about the fact that the final apparition in Lourdes took place at quite some distance away. Over the course of five months, Bernadette had drawn closer and closer to Mary on an emotional and spiritual level. It was therefore not important that there was a physical barrier between them. Bernadette had come to a point where the encounter with Mary could happen in her heart, so that she felt “at the same distance as before” even when she was separated from the Grotto. Perhaps this is why so many people have devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, even if they have never been there.

Distance and separation are important metaphors for us as Carmelites. The first Carmelites had to leave their home and travel to a new environment; during the course of the apparitions Bernadette left the Cachot because of the crowds of sight-seers and her family found itself in an entirely new situation. Many Carmelite saints – especially the poets – describe life as a journey seeking the person we’re separated from; Bernadette sought Mary even when she couldn’t get to the Grotto. Carmelites also learn that we have to separate ourselves from too much concern with material things; Bernadette’s journey to the Grotto began with a physical necessity for firewood, but ended with her relying more importantly on the things of God.

La Ribère, the hillside opposite the Grotto over the River Gave, is perhaps my favourite place in Lourdes. I like the crowds of people in Lourdes – my brothers and sisters in Christ – but Jesus

sometimes needed to retreat from the crowds to find a quiet space, and from La Ribère one can gaze at the Grotto from a distance, separated from the noise and the crowd. It was on this hillside that a monastery was built for Carmelite nuns. They live an enclosed life, and rarely venture down to the Grotto. Like Bernadette, they gaze upon Our Lady from a distance but know that she is in their hearts. Some years after the apparitions, Bernadette herself discerned God's call for her to become a nun, a Sister of Charity at Nevers, and never returned to Lourdes. Bernadette knew that change, separation and distance were part of God's plan for her.



Carmelite friars sharing a joke with an assisted pilgrim in Lourdes.

Mirrors of Carmel

It isn't only the story of the apparitions and Bernadette's life in which I hear echoes of Carmelite spirituality. Every time I return to the Sanctuary I see a little more clearly the parallels between Lourdes and Carmel.

Recently, for example, I had the opportunity to learn about a Discalced Carmelite nun, Blessed Miriam Baouardy, known in Carmel as Sister Mariam of Jesus Crucified, and sometimes nicknamed 'the Little Arab'. She was born in Palestine in 1846, two years after Bernadette Soubirous, and went on to become a domestic servant for various families across Europe. In 1858, the year of the apparitions in Lourdes, she was attacked by a fellow servant and left for dead. Years later Mariam described her recovery: she was picked up and healed by a mysterious lady "in a grotto somewhere", and Mariam spoke of being cared for by the Virgin Mary and the saints. Mariam consecrated herself to God through Our Lady, and eventually entered Carmel in 1867 at the monastery in Pau, some 30 kilometres from Lourdes. She died in 1878, one year before Saint Bernadette, having shared that young woman's experience of suffering and illness. A painting of her hangs in Lourdes among the saints depicted in the Basilica of Saint Pius X. The great Carmelite Saint Thérèse of Lisieux is another contemporary in France of Saint Bernadette; her writings have helped me to understand better the message of confident trust in God's merciful love that Our Lady gave in Lourdes.

Prayer, community and service

The present day saints of Carmel – my sisters and brothers in the Order today – have also helped me better understand the message of Lourdes. In 1995 the General Chapter of the Carmelite Order defined in very simple terms the Order's charism, that is, its particular grace from God for the benefit of the Church and the World. The Chapter declared that "Carmelites form praying communities at the service of all God's people." In other words, in order for something to be authentically 'Carmelite', it must have the elements of prayer, community and service.

In Lourdes, these three elements are plain for all to see. Prayer is very obvious to all the six million pilgrims and visitors who come to Lourdes every year. There is the prayer of the public liturgies

that take place throughout the day: Masses, recitations of the rosary, penitential services, the Divine Office, Eucharistic adoration, the processions, and so on. Then there is the private prayer. It is not unusual to see individual pilgrims at prayer in the Grotto throughout the day and night. Many express their prayers by touching the rock of the Grotto, by leaving their petition slips there, or lighting a candle. In our society it is unusual to see people at prayer, but in Lourdes it is very visible and doesn't have to be explained; it's a glimpse once again of the reality of that 'other world', God's Kingdom.

Community is another element at the heart of the Carmelite charism, and this very visible aspect of Lourdes life is another glance at what the Kingdom of God might be like. People from every race and way of life come to Lourdes, even people of different religions too since Mary is also revered by Muslims and Hindus. All pilgrims join together in a worldwide family, most clearly seen at the twice-weekly International Mass, but also in the tremendous social gatherings that take place in the cafés and hotels in the town. We belong to a Church that is Catholic, which means universal, and in Lourdes that is really brought home to us in a way that most of us aren't privileged enough to see in our own parish or Carmelite community.

The third element of the Carmelite charism, service, is for me the most striking and unique aspect of Lourdes. Prayer and community can be seen in many pilgrimage sites around the world, but in Lourdes service becomes visible in a way that I have never seen matched elsewhere. This is because Lourdes' reputation for healings attracts thousands of sick and disabled pilgrims (these days referred to as 'assisted pilgrims'). Many of these are not expecting physical healings, but rather some sort of spiritual or emotional healing from Christ who walked among the sick and distressed. To enable these people to be appropriately cared for, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims – especially young people – come to Lourdes as helpers at their service. I myself have had the privilege of serving assisted pilgrims in Lourdes, and come to realise that I have gained far more from the experience than I have given. Caring for the sick was an important factor in the lives of many Carmelite saints, including Elijah, Elisha, Albert of Trapani, John of the Cross and Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi. In caring for the most needy in their communities they encountered Christ himself.



Bro. Ged Walsh, O.Carm., having his hands blessed for service by the Prior Provincial of the British Province, Fr. Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.

Friendship with God

Exponents of the Carmelite way of life tell us that lives of prayer, community and service can open us up to God's gift of contemplation. John of the Cross described contemplation as the in-pouring of God into the soul. Another way of describing contemplation is simply being friends with God. I believe Lourdes is a place which encourages us to be contemplatives; people who become friends with God, who come to see with the eyes and to love with the heart of God, pilgrims who learn to cooperate with God in service, who seek God in prayer, who embrace the God they encounter in community with others.